30

South Asia: Dravidian linguistic history

Franklin C. Southworth and David W. McAlpin

The ancestral Dravidian languages, related to ancient Elamite of Iran, originated west of the Indus valley and probably spread through there into peninsular India during the 3rd millennium BCE*, the period of the Indus Valley civilization. Relationships between the Dravidian and Indo-Aryan languages are also informative about Dravidian prehistory.*

The Dravidian languages are spoken mainly in Peninsular India, with several smaller languages in central and northern India (Figure 30.1). The Tamil language is also spoken in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and South Africa. Primary speakers of Dravidian languages in India are estimated at roughly 200 million (Krishnamurti 2003, 22–27). The four major Dravidian languages, each the official language of an Indian state, have substantial literary traditions, with inscriptions dating from the 1st century BCE for Tamil, 2nd century CE for Telugu, 450 CE for Kannada, and 9th century CE for Malayalam.

Proto-Dravidian or PD, one of the two subfamilies of Proto-Zagrosian (Figure 30.2), branches first into: (1) Proto-North Dravidian (PND), with two members, Kurux and Malto; and (2) Proto-Peninsular Dravidian (PPD), with four subgroups (Tamil-Tulu, Telugu, Gondi-Kui, Kolami-Parji). Here we focus mainly on the three primary groupings, PD, PND, and PPD.

Brahui, formerly believed to be a Dravidian language, has now been shown to be an Elamitic language, thus part of the proposed Zagrosian family which includes Elamitic and Dravidian (McAlpin, in prep.). Brahui was accepted as a Dravidian language for nearly a hundred years following the publication of Bray in 1909 (McAlpin 2003; see Krishnamurti 2003: 91 ff. for the earlier view). The current range of Brahui overlaps with its range in antiquity in southeastern Iran, but there is no evidence for its present location in the Brahui hills of Pakistan before the Baluch migrations around 1000 CE. Thus, it plays no direct role in the following discussion, although vocabulary shared

The Encyclopedia of Global Human Migration, Edited by Immanuel Ness.
© 2013 Blackwell Publishing Ltd. Published 2013 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
DOI: 10.1002/9781444351071.wbeghm830

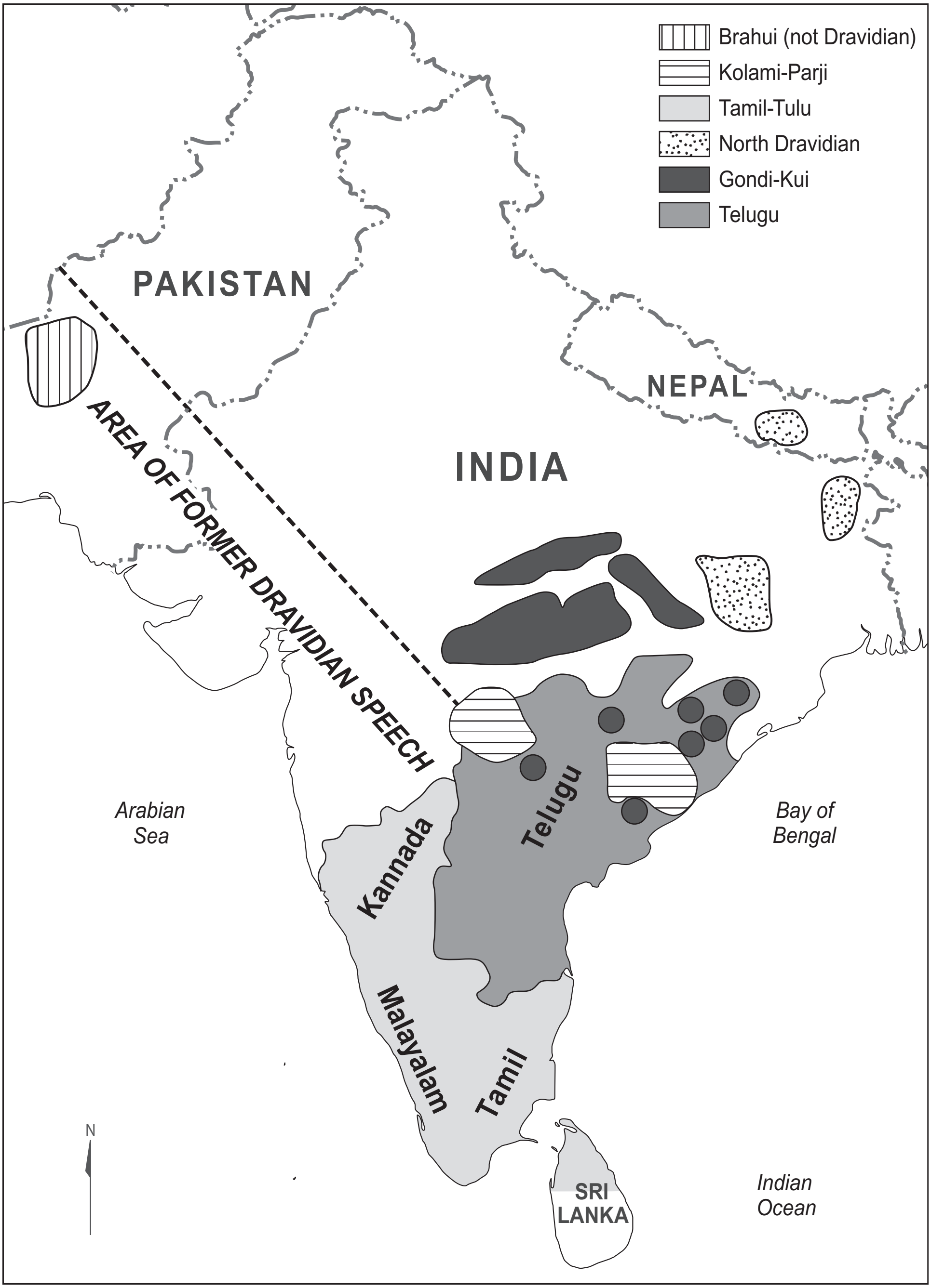

Figure 30.1 Map of the Dravidian languages in modern Pakistan and India. The names of the four literary languages are in bold. Map production by Education and Multimedia Services, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University.

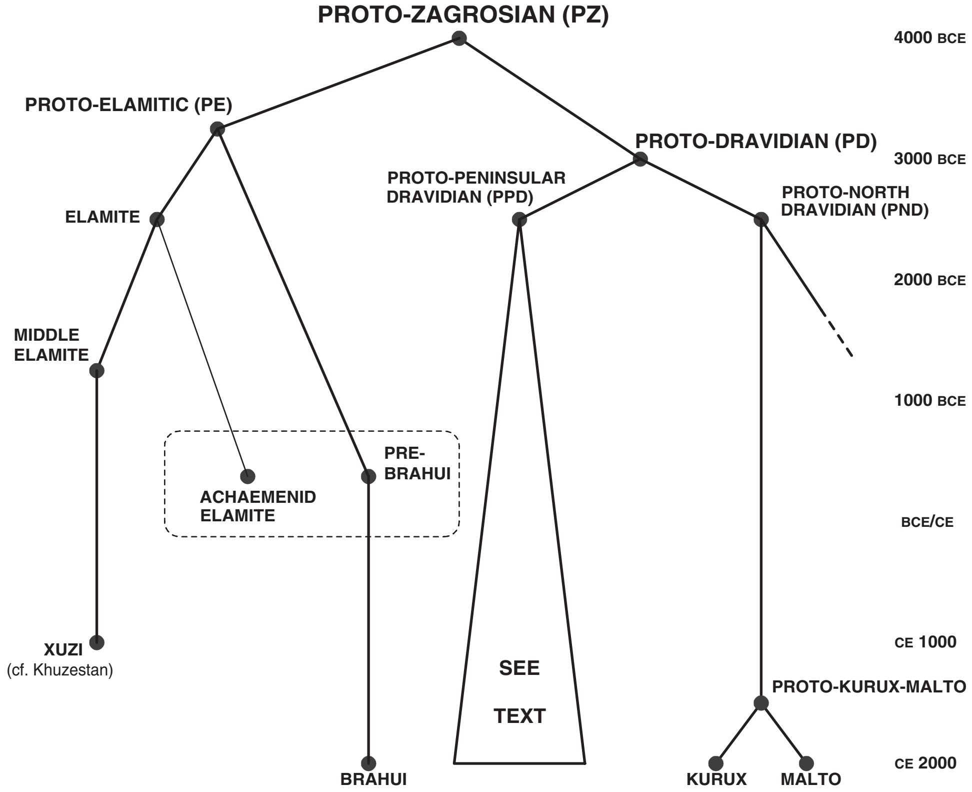

Figure 30.2 A family tree of the Elamite and Dravidian languages. The dating is approximate, and the dashed line around Achaemenid and Pre-Brahui indicates contact. The rightward branch from PND represents the source of Dravidian loanwords in Vedic Indo-Aryan (glossed as Indic in chapter 19).

between Brahui and Dravidian is relevant for reconstructing Proto-Dravidian and Proto-Zagrosian.

While the proposed Elamite–Dravidian connection has been widely known since the publication of McAlpin's 1981 book, it is now on a firmer footing (McAlpin, in prep.). As a result, much earlier work on Dravidian has been based on an erroneous view of the relationships. Even now, statements about Dravidian must include a warning that they may be modified in future, as more Elamo-Dravidian correspondences are identified.

Proto-Dravidian (PD)

The reconstructed vocabulary of PD reflects a society engaged in animal husbandry, with some knowledge of agriculture. Words for sheep, goat and cattle, all inherited from Proto-Zagrosian,[1] along with verbs referring to driving and grazing animals, words for "herd," "flock," "shepherd," and several words which mean both "house/dwelling" and "animal stall," indicate the importance of herding. No specific grains are reconstructible, although reconstructed agricultural terms include words for digging and digging tools, operations such as winnowing, churning, reaping, and grinding grain, along with several words meaning "grain" or "seed," "chaff" and "husk," and possibly a word for the plough. The only reconstructible food plant names are onion/garlic, yam, and eggplant, some of which may be later borrowings into individual Dravidian languages from local sources. Thus, it is unlikely that these people were sedentary farmers at this stage. Several different land types are distinguished, including low lying land, uncultivated land, and field/open space (Southworth 2009).

In general, older Elamite resembles PD, younger Elamite resembles Brahui (McAlpin 1981, McAlpin, in prep.). Thus we may posit, as a starting point, that the Proto-Dravidian community probably moved from somewhere in the south of present-day Iran. Places for extended agriculture in the Iranian plateau are few and the routes between them limited. Coming from southern Iran, the only viable route is the reliably well-watered valley of the Helmand. This was the probable location of PD and its first split into Proto-North Dravidian (PND) and Proto-Peninsular Dravidian (PPD). PD underwent extensive development, including changes to personal pronouns and the development of strong retroflexion. The early Dravidians developed large-scale animal husbandry, living off animals through milk and dairy products, with some agriculture when they could not trade. They spread towards South Asia by two routes. PND went up the valley of the Helmand and crossed into the Kabul valley, where it expanded. One small group, Proto-Kurux-Malto, passed early through the Khyber Pass and into the Indus valley, eventually reaching the Narbada valley. These languages show no signs of early interaction with other South Asian groups, keep a full set of uvulars and a conservative morphology. Malto later moved north to Bihar, and a small group of Kudux speakers were moved to southern Nepal around 1840.

PPD took the direct route through the Bolan Pass into the central Indus valley. As expected, there were massive borrowings for new plants and animals, but more significantly, there was a major phonological shift. All uvulars merged with velars and a new past tense formation in -*t*- was created. After an extended period of expansion and interaction, some continued from the Indus into the South Asian peninsula, probably in a series of movements. The movements in the Indus region involved a migration of pastoralists, perhaps growing grain when they could not trade for it.

Having presumably dispersed throughout the Indus valley, all surviving groups of PPD spread southeast through Gujarat and into the valley of the Tapti. Since the latitude of the Tapti is close to the southern limit for growing wheat, their traditional West Asian winter crops may have failed. Some of them, speaking what became Proto-Kolami-Parji, headed eastward up the Tapti where they encountered new crops. Others continued south through the savannah in the rain shadow east of the Western Ghats, abandoning traditional field agriculture, to become Proto-Tamil-Tulu. A few groups (Tulu and Koraga) may have moved separately down the west coast of India. Steadily expanding, Tamil-Tulu gradually filled up the western and southern parts of the peninsula and the northern part of Sri Lanka. Meanwhile, a second linguistic group, including Proto-Telugu along with Proto-Gondi-Kui, followed the Godavari to interpenetrate the earlier Kolami-Parji.

In the mid-2nd millennium BCE there arose in South India an archaeological complex known as the Southern Neolithic, first attested in several adjoining districts of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. From this core region, the complex spread rapidly in all directions until it occupied "a very vast area from the Krishna-Tungabhadra in the north . . . to the Kaveri in the south, and from the Krishna-Godavari mouths in the east to Dharwar in the west" (Sankalia 1974: 521). The area thus described lies entirely within the region now occupied by Dravidian languages. The crop plants identified in Phase II of the Southern Neolithic (2300–1800 BCE) match closely the plant names reconstructed by Southworth (2009) for a period he called "late Proto-Dravidian," which includes the language groups we have classed as subgroups of Proto-Peninsular Dravidian. Many of these crops are still grown in the area today. There is also evidence for the continuation of the activities of specialists in animal husbandry (Allchin 1963). Thus it appears likely that the farmers and herders of the Southern Neolithic were largely Dravidian-speaking, implying that the Dravidian languages were well established in South India by the mid-2nd millennium BCE, though other language groups may still have existed in the area.

In the light of our current understanding of the earlier movements of Dravidian, it is likely that the agricultural development of the Southern Neolithic resulted (in whole or in part) from interactions within PPD-speaking populations. In the authors' opinion, the two groups (ancestral Kolami-Parji and Telugu) of PPD abandoned wheat and barley and adopted new crops, including millets (Southworth 2009; Fuller 2009), creating a locally adapted set that powered population expansion for Telugu (with Gondi?) and for Tamil-Malayalam and Kannada. Thus, it would be a mistake to attribute the entire Southern Neolithic crop inventory to the proto-stage of PPD.

The evidence of Old Indo-Aryan (OIA)

The North Dravidian expansion brought them into contact with Indo-Iranians. Later PPD expansions from the south into the Panjab provided a second point of contact. Possible Dravidian borrowings into OIA, including the Rigvedic ritual language, have been seen by many scholars as evidence of a Dravidian presence in the Panjab during that period. These borrowings increased in frequency during the Rigvedic period, and continued with the eastward movement of the bearers of the Vedic tradition to the Kurukshetra area of Haryana in the late Vedic and post-Vedic periods. As this area contains no evidence of a prior Dravidian-speaking population, such as place names or river names, the sources of these borrowings must have been Dravidian-Indo-Aryan bilingual speakers who were connected to the larger Indo-Aryan-speaking community (Witzel 1999).

The influx of Dravidian, as well as Indo-Aryan-speaking peoples, into the Indus valley may have begun during the 3rd millennium BCE. This is based on archaeological considerations (see e. g. Bellwood 2009: 62–66), as well as the chronology of the polities associated with the Elamite language. Elam was a partner of Sumer in the development of urban civilization and writing. The so-called Proto-Elamite script from sites such as Susa in the lowlands of eastern Mesopotamia, dating from around 3000 BCE, is undeciphered and technically similar to the Harappan script. With a shift to a cuneiform script, Elamite became readable around 2300 BCE. From this time onwards, the two main Elamite centers were Susa itself, occupied in the Old Elamite and Middle Elamite phases between 2600 and 1000 BCE, and Anshan in the mountains near Persepolis (Achaemenid Elamite, 550–330 BCE) (Stolper 2004).

The small but gradually increasing flow of Dravidian loanwords into the Indo-Aryan religious literature and later secular writings must be explained by the slow integration of Dravidian-speaking groups into the wider Indo-Aryan-speaking society over successive generations, during which time Dravidian words passed into colloquial Indo-Aryan and thence gradually into the more conservative ritual and literary contexts.

A few examples of early loanwords must suffice here, as this material has been discussed in detail elsewhere (see Southworth, forthcoming, for an update of earlier work).[2] These and other cases show cognates in the Nuristani languages (situated in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan) and the Dardic languages (in adjoining areas of Pakistan and Jammu-Kashmir), giving these words a distributional profile within Indo-Aryan that is close to that of inherited Indo-European words like OIA *trayaḥ* "three", *bhrātṛ* "brother". Thus these borrowed Dravidian words probably entered the Indus Valley in the mouths of Indo-Aryan speakers who came from west of the Khyber Pass. A number of other words may have entered OIA by the same route, though they are not recorded until later (cf. e.g. Sanskrit *ēḍa* "kind of sheep" ← PD **yāṭu* ← PZ **hēṭu* "sheep, goat"). While Degener (2002) classed the Nuristani languages as an independent subgroup of the Indo-Iranian family, Blažek and Hegedus (2010) estimate that Nuristani and Dardic were both part of the Indo-Aryan branch of Proto-Indo-Iranian, and that they separated from Indo-Aryan at about 1900 and 1600 BCE respectively. Thus, these borrowings are probably earlier than the Vedic hymns.

Apart from Proto-Zagrosian as an ultimate source, Proto-North Dravidian figures as a likely source of the Rigvedic and other OIA borrowings, suggesting that the two main branches of Proto-Dravidian may have already separated from each other before reaching the Indus valley. A possible scenario which would explain these findings is that PND-speaking herders were present for at least several generations in an area near the route later taken by Indo-Iranian speakers moving into South Asia, and that the two groups subsequently had substantial contact, probably involving agricultural techniques. This mixed group, presumably with Indo-Aryan speakers in the majority, may have formed a significant portion of the population of the northern Indus Valley at the time the bearers of the Vedic ritual culture entered the region (for pre-Vedic Indo-Aryan speakers in South Asia see Parpola 1988, 2002).

Other evidence

Most of the Dravidian languages are now located in a monsoonal climatic zone very different from that in which they spent much of their early history. The large areas representing the major literary languages presumably result from expansions of earlier smaller language groups, expansions probably triggered in large part by the "agricultural revolution" which produced the Southern Neolithic. It may not be coincidental that the core area of the Southern Neolithic complex sits astride the boundary of two major PPD subgroups, Tamil-Tulu and Telugu.

Classical Tamil poetic conventions (c.100 CE) keep a recollection of this time. Of the five traditional "landscapes" of *akam* "interior" poetry, three reflect this period: mountainsides (hunter, gatherer, slash-and-burn fields), seashore (fishing), and pastoral (herding). A fourth, river agriculture (rice cultivation) is clearly later (and aesthetically undesirable!). The fifth is drought/desert. The implied context is one of intense economic exchange among the landscapes.

An important part of the background of the Southern Neolithic is the discontinuity in the names of crops, particularly grains, between Proto-Zagrosian and Proto-Peninsular Dravidian. The PPD word for rice (Tamil (*v*)*ar-i*(*-ci*), Kannada *akki*), a widespread and culturally important crop in South India, is derived from a PZ word for "seed", which also retains that meaning in modern Dravidian languages (cf. Tamil *ēlav-arici*, Kannada *ēl-akki* "cardamom seed": DEDR,[3] 907). When Dravidian speakers today refer to wheat, they use a form borrowed from Sanskrit *godhūma*, for example Tamil *kōtume*, *gōtume*. The names of the staple grains of the Southern Neolithic and their modern replacements were borrowed from as yet unknown sources. Thus, it appears that Dravidian-speaking groups lost part of their agricultural knowledge at some period. The Southern Neolithic was a system that combined an older tradition of animal husbandry, including the well-known archaeological cattle pens (ash mounds; Allchin 1963), with a new package of crops, of which the staples were legumes and millets.

There is strong linguistic evidence for a former Dravidian-speaking presence in western India, in the area now occupied by the Indo-Aryan languages Marathi-Konkani, Gujarati, and possibly Sindhi (Southworth 2005: 317–318). This evidence includes lexical and structural borrowings from Dravidian into the Indo-Aryan languages of the area, as well as Dravidian place-name suffixes in Maharashtra and Gujarat. Dravidian-derived river names are also found in Maharashtra (Namboothiry 1987, cited in Witzel 1999: 64). The place-name suffixes and river names can be accounted for as borrowings from PPD at the earliest. Most of the Dravidian borrowings in post-Vedic OIA may well have come from this source, rather than from poorly documented Dravidian speakers in the upper Indus or Gangetic plains. On the other hand, this does not conflict with the suggestion of an earlier movement of Dravidian through this region, as suggested by Bellwood (2009).

In addition to this linguistic evidence, Trautmann (1981) has shown that features of "Dravidian" kinship systems, particularly cross-cousin marriage and compatible terminological categories, are found in the southern part of the present Indo-Aryan-speaking zone. The ancient South Asian historical tradition lists both Maharashtra and Gujarat among the "Dravidian" countries (Thapar 1975). The historian S. B. Joshi (1951) claims that southern Maharashtra was a Dravidian-speaking area as late as the 12th century CE (cited in Deshpande 1979: 102).

A number of archaeological sites in Maharashtra, belonging to the Malwa culture of the first half of the 2nd millennium BCE, were characterized by "pre-Chalcolithic

Neolithic elements" which can be linked to the Southern Neolithic (Allchin & Allchin 1982: 352; see also Bellwood 2009: 60–62). This would imply that the Dravidian presence in this area, which may have extended into the lower Indus valley (Sindh), was in place by the early 2nd millennium BCE at the latest.

The evidence of the Indus Valley writing system (Harappan script)

Over the years, scholars from many countries have attempted to decipher the Indus Valley seal inscriptions, but there is as yet no accepted interpretation of the script. A number of serious attempts to interpret the script as Dravidian have been made, notably by Parpola (1994). The Proto-Elamite script, given its greater age, technical similarity (shapes, number of signs, modifications, etc.), and that it was the closest writing system, was most probably the model for the Indus Valley script. Since we can read neither, this tells us little. Given the significant impact that the Indus region had on PPD and the probable time periods involved, PPD probably played some role in the Indus Valley civilization. But what role? Administrators, priests, or peripheral pastoralists? The hypothesis that the script is Dravidian, while reasonable, remains a hypothesis. Barring major discoveries, this is not likely to change.

Recently, several scholars have questioned whether the script was even a representation of language in any sense, since the brevity of the inscriptions and the frequencies of the signs do not correspond to those of any other known script (Farmer et al. 2005). However, this suggestion has also not been generally accepted (Kenoyer 2009; Parpola 2010).

Apart from the identity of the script, the question whether Dravidian was a dominant language of the Indus Valley civilization has yet to be answered. The paucity of Dravidian loanwords in the earliest Vedic, along with the presence of numerous loanwords from other languages, has been noted by Witzel (1999) as an argument against such domination. However, this may only mean that contact between Dravidian speakers and the bearers of the Vedic tradition was, at least in the early period, mediated by other language groups. Further work on Dravidian borrowings in OIA may possibly throw light on this question (see Southworth forthcoming).

SEE ALSO: 19 Europe and western Asia: Indo-European linguistic history; 31 South Asia: archaeology

Notes

1 PZ **aš* "cow"; AE *aš* "cow, herd", PD **ā(y)* "cow" DEDR 334, Br. *xar-ās* "bull" DEDR 1123 (compounded with *xar* "male animal?"); PZ **hēṭu* "sheep, goat," El. *hidu* "sheep, goat," Br. *hēṭ* "she-goat," PD **yāṭu* "sheep, goat" DEDR 5152–borrowed into Sanskrit as *ēḍa* "a kind of sheep"; see Turner (1966), entry 2152.

2 Three examples can be given, as follows.

    (1) Proto-Zagrosian (PZ) **kōlum* "grain" (PE **ǩōlum*, El. *šulum* "standing grain," Br. *xōlum* "wheat"; PD **kōlum*, PPD **kōl-am*, Tamil **kūlam* "grain" [generic term] DEDR 1906)

is a likely source of Rigvedic _godhūma_ "wheat," probably first borrowed into colloquial Indo-Aryan as _*kōlum/gōlum_ and later Aryanized folk-etymologically; see Witzel (1999: 29) for a different view, and Southworth (forthcoming) for additional detail).

(2) PZ _*qal_ "field" (PE _*xal_, El. _hal_ "land," _hal-at_ "clay"; PD _*qal_ "field," PND _*_q^x_al_ "field," Kx. _xall "field"_, Mt. _qalu_ "field on the hills"; PD _*kaḷ-am/an_ "threshing ground") is the probable source of late Rigvedic _khala_ "threshing floor" (but cf. Witzel 1999: 17). Note that PND _*_q^x_al_ is the most direct source for OIA _khala_.

(3) PND _*qaṭ-q-V_ "bitter" DEDR 1135 (Br. _xar-en_ "bitter" ← PZ _*qaṭ-_) is the probable source of Rigvedic _kaṭuka_ "pungent, bitter," while PPD _*kaṭu_ is probably the source of a later borrowing, Classical Sanskrit _kaṭu_ "bitter" (Kuiper 1991: 29).

3 _A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary._ For publication details see Burrow & Emeneau (1984) in the references list.

References

Allchin, B. & Allchin, F. R. (1982) _The Rise of Civilization in India and Pakistan_. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Allchin, F. R. (1963) _Neolithic Cattle-Keepers of South India: A Study of the Deccan Ashmounds_. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bellwood, P. (2009) Early farmers: issues of spread and migration with respect to the Indian subcontinent. In T. Osada (2009) pp. 55–70.

Blažek, V. & Hegedus. I. (2010) On the position of Nuristani within Indo-Iranian. Paper presented at the Sound of Indo-European 2 Conference in Opava, Czech Republic, Nov. 2010.

Bray, D. (1909) _The Brahui Language. Part I, Introduction and Grammar_. Calcutta: Superintendent of Government Printing.

Burrow, T. & Emeneau, M. B. (1984) _A Dravidian Etymological Dictionary_ (DEDR), 2nd edn. Oxford: Clarendon.

Degener, A. (2002) The Nuristani Languages. In N. Sims-Williams (ed.), _Indo-Iranian Languages and Peoples_. London: British Academy.

Deshpande, M. (1979) _Sociolinguistic Attitudes in India: An Historical Reconstruction_. Ann Arbor: Karoma.

Farmer, S., Sproat, R., & Witzel, M. (2005) The collapse of the Indus-Script thesis: the myth of a literate Harappan civilization. _Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies_ 11(2) (Dec. 13).

Fuller, D. (2009) Silence before sedentism and the advent of cash crops. In Osada (2009), pp. 147–190.

Joshi, S. B. (1951) Etymology of place-names paṭṭi-haṭṭi, some observations on the history of Maharashtra and Karnataka. _Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute_ 32, 41–56.

Kenoyer, J. M. (2009) The origin, context and function of the Indus script: recent insights from Harappa. In Osada (2009), pp. 13–32.

Krishnamurti, B. (2003) _The Dravidian Languages: A Comparative, Historical and Typological Study_. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kuiper, F. (1991) _Aryans in the Rigveda_. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

McAlpin, D. W. (1981) _Proto-Elamo-Dravidian: The Evidence and its Implications_. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society.

McAlpin, D. (2003) Velars, uvulars, and the North Dravidian hypothesis. _Journal of the American Oriental Society_ 123(3), 521–546.

McAlpin, D. (in prep.) Modern colloquial eastern Elamite. Unpublished MS in preparation.

Namboothiry, M. N. (1987) Indian Toponymy: a critical evaluation of the work done in this field in India with a bibliography. *Puthusseri Ramachandran* 1987, 1–47.

Osada, T. (ed.) (2009) *Linguistics, Archaeology and Human Past in South Asia*. Delhi: Manohar.

Parpola, A. (1988) The coming of the Aryans to Iran and India and the cultural and ethnic identity of the Dāsas. *Studia Orientalia* 64, 195–302.

Parpola, A. (1994) *Deciphering the Indus script*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Parpola, A. (2002) From the dialects of Old Indo-Aryan to Proto-Indo-Aryan and Proto-Indo-Iranian. In N. Sims-Williams (ed.), *Indo-Iranian Languages and Peoples*. London: British Academy, pp. 43–102.

Parpola, A. (2010) A Dravidian solution to the Indus script problem. *Kalaignar M. Karunanidhi Classical Tamil Research Endowment Lecture, World Classical Tamil Conference, Coimbatore, June 25, 2010. Chennai: Central Institute of Classical Tamil.*

Sankalia, H. D. (1974) *Prehistory and Protohistory of India and Pakistan*. Poona: Deccan College Postgraduate and Research Institute.

Southworth, F. C. (2005) *Linguistic Archaeology of South Asia*. London: Routledge/Curzon.

Southworth, F. C. (2009) Proto-Dravidian Agriculture. In Osada (2009), pp. 101–26.

Southworth, F. C. (forthcoming) Notes on the SARVA CDIAL-DEDR files. To appear on the SARVA (South Asian Residual Vocabulary Assemblage) At www.aa.tufs.ac.jp/sarva/.

Stolper, M. (2004) Elamite. In R. D. Woodward (ed.), *World's Ancient Languages*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 60–94.

Trautmann, T. (1981) *Dravidian Kinship*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thapar, R. (1975) Puranic lineages and archaeological cultures. *Puratattva* 8, 86–98. Reprinted in R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpetations*. New Delhi: Orient Longman (1978).

Witzel, M. (1999) Substrate languages in Old Indo-Aryan. *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 5, 1–67.